YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Devarim**

**guest SICHA OF RAV YESHAI JESELSOHN**

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**לע"נ**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l**

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**יהודה פנחס ע"ה בן הרב שרגא פייוועל נ"י**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

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**"As the Stars of Heaven in Multitude"**

Summarized by Eitan Sivan

Translated by David Strauss

**The Blessing**

The book of *Devarim* opens with Moshe's oration to the people of Israel, in which he prepares them for entering the Land of Israel. Moshe reviews a wide variety of topics, the awareness of which will help Israel as they enter the land. At the beginning of his words, Moshe reminds the people of God's blessing that they will inherit the land and have many descendants:

Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, to give to them and to their seed after them. And I spoke to you at that time, saying: I am not able to bear you myself alone; the Lord your God has multiplied you, and, behold, you are this day as the stars of heaven in multitude. The Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times so many more as you are, and bless you, as He has promised you. (*Devarim* 1:8-11)

Moshe declares that the land belongs to the people of Israel and that God cares for them, and confirms that they will receive what was promised to them in the past. In describing the blessing to the people of Israel, he mentions the great increase in number that the people have merited, and compares them to the stars of heaven. Rashi (ad loc.) immediately raises an objection to this comparison:

"And, behold, you are this day as the stars of heaven in multitude." But were they that day as the stars of the heaven? Were they not, indeed, only sixty myriads? What, then, is the meaning of "And, behold, you are this day"? It means: Behold you are comparable to the day, existing forever, just as the sun and the moon and the stars. (Rashi, *Devarim* 10:1)

Although Rashi himself explains in his answer that the verse actually means the people of Israel are eternal, like the heavenly bodies, it seems that some additional insights can be gleaned from the comparison, which shed light on the essence of the people of Israel.

**Comparison to the Sand and the Stars**

It is difficult to talk about a blessing related to the heavenly bodies without recalling God's blessing to Avraham in *Parashat Vayera*:

And He said: By Myself have I sworn, says the Lord, that since you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son – I will surely bless you, and I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heaven and like the sand which is upon the seashore, and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. (*Bereishit* 22:16-17)

Avraham had already been blessed that his descendants would be as many as the stars of heaven (15:5), but after the *akeida*, another image is added: "and as the sand which is upon the seashore."[[1]](#footnote-1) If we look for a common denominator for both images, apart from the great quantity that they represent, we can point to the fact that in both cases we are dealing with a collective. We do not relate separately to each grain of sand, but rather to the sand as a whole; similarly, an ordinary person who gazes at the stars sees them as a huge whole, without dwelling on any of the particular stars.

In light of this, we can say that the blessing given to Avraham includes two aspects: not only will he have a large number of offspring, but they will form a united and cohesive group. That is the strength of the people of Israel. And for this reason, there is no point in trying to count the people – because their quality finds its greatest expression when they act as a whole, not as a random collection of individuals.

Based on this, we can also understand what David's sin was when he commanded Yoav to count the people of Israel despite the latter's opposition:

And the king said to Yoav the captain of the host that was with him: Go now to and fro through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Be'er-Sheva, and count the people, that I may know the number of the people. And Yoav said to the king: May the Lord your God add to the people, how many they may be, a hundredfold, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it; but why does my lord the king desire this thing? But the king's word prevailed against Yoav, and against the captains of the host. And Yoav and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king, to count the people of Israel. (II *Shmuel* 24:2-4)

The commentators offer several explanations of the problem with counting the people, for which David was punished. Two main directions can be identified. Some have suggested that counting the people of Israel is problematic in itself. Others have explained – based on the assumption that the counting was done in preparation for war – that the count indicated that David believed military strength would come from the size of the army, rather than from God.

It seems that at their root, both approaches stem from the same principle – the collective of Israel and its meaning. David's refusal to recognize the power of the people of Israel as a collective, and his attempt to break them down into individual elements, lead to his being punished, and to a great plague among the people.

King David immediately understands that he has sinned, and he acts to establish a special place where all of Israel will come together: he purchases the threshing floor from Aravna the Yevusi to serve as the future location of the Temple, where all the people will unite as one.

**Personal Repair**

In some years, the 9th of Av falls on Shabbat (*Parashat Devarim*), and then the fast is postponed to Sunday, the 10th of Av. On that Shabbat, it is customary not to observe any mourning practices at all. On the face of it, this involves not only a cancelation of the mourning of Tisha Be-Av, but also a day-long "departure" from the Three Weeks and their significance. However, a more careful examination of the meaning of this period indicates that this is not the case. This is because even the fast of the 9th of Av has two components: mourning and sorrow for the rupture and the destruction; and at the same time, contemplating repair and accepting the need for change in the future. When the 9th of Av falls out on Shabbat, we do not engage with the rupture and the pain at all, but it is certainly possible and appropriate to contemplate the repair of that rupture that befell Israel.

Even nowadays, with all the progress and the return to the Land of Israel and the establishment of the state that we have been privileged to see by the grace of heaven, there is still no temple, a place that unites us all together. We must still contemplate how we can repair the fracture in the nation and truly transform ourselves into *Kelal Yisrael*, the collective of Israel.

In order to answer this, we must undergo honest introspection. How do we relate to other members of the people of Israel who live around us but are different from us, both in their appearance and in their outlooks? Do we relate to them as our brothers despite the gaps between us, or do we cut off contact with everyone who seems distant from us?

Only through engaging with these questions can we begin the processes of repentance among the people of Israel. Only in this way can we begin to repair the greatest breach we have experienced – the loss of the blessing given to Avraham, that the people of Israel will be as many as the stars and the sand, and also as united as they are.

During the period of *bein ha-zemanin*, we go home, to the environment in which we grew up, where there are many and diverse people, far more than in the Yeshiva. We must treat everyone warmly and with kindness, and contribute to repairing the rift that has been created in the nation.

May it be God's will that this will lead to the fulfillment of God's blessings mentioned by Moshe in *Parashat Devarim –* that we merit to multiply and increase, in unity and closeness. May the repair of the baseless hate and strife in the people, lead, with God's help, to the building of the Temple in our days, which will deepen the bond between *Kelal Yisrael* and their Creator.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Rav Jeselsohn on Shabbat *Parashat Devarim* 5782.]

1. Of course, he had also been blessed still earlier that his seed would be as numerous as the dust of the earth (13:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)